

By the Kansas State Historical Society

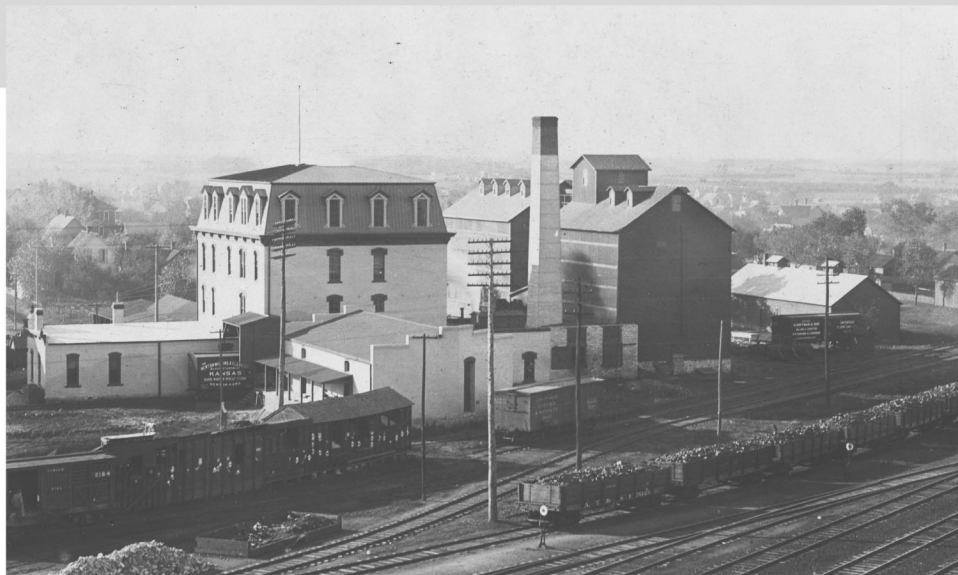
Bernard Warkentin: A Mennonite Immigrant Changes Agriculture

Many Germans from Russia came to live in Kansas. Most of them were Mennonites. They were farmers who came to Kansas because of the good, cheap land. They also came for religious freedom. Earlier these Germans had moved to Russia for a better life. But Russian rulers wanted the young Mennonite men to join the army. This was against their religious beliefs. In Kansas they would not have to fight in the army.

Bernard Warkentin was one of the Mennonites who came to Kansas. He came with his family and settled in Halstead. His father was a miller – someone who grinds grain into flour.

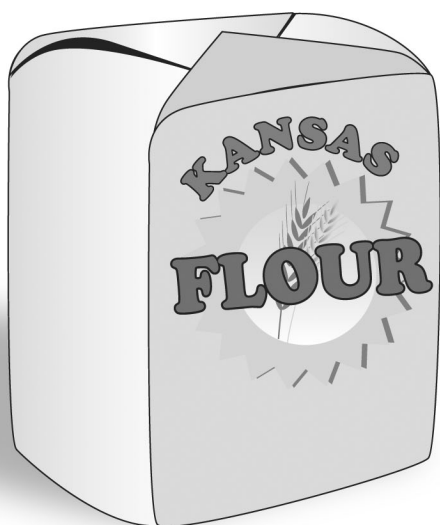
In Russia, Warkentin's father had experimented with many types of wheat. He wanted wheat that would make good flour. Soft wheat flour is good for making biscuits and pastries. Hard wheat flour makes better bread. He wanted wheat that would grow well in harsh climates. Hard wheat grows better in hotter, drier climates. This wheat is planted before winter and harvested in the summer.





Today Kansas is called the wheat state. Kansas is one of the biggest wheat producing states in the country. How did that happen? Bernard Warkentin was responsible for helping farmers find the best kind of wheat to grow in Kansas. Warkentin knew that hard winter wheat would grow well in Kansas.

At the time Warkentin came to Kansas many farmers grew corn and a few grew wheat. But the grasshopper population was out of control. They ate everything in sight! They ate the corn and most of the spring wheat. A few farmers had planted hard winter wheat. Some of these patches of hard wheat survived the grasshoppers. Warkentin convinced farmers to plant more hard winter wheat. Soon Kansas wheat was sold throughout the United States and Europe.



In 1873 Warkentin started his first flour mill. At that time most Kansans bought their flour from Missouri. Warkentin wanted Kansas farmers to use their wheat to make flour. He built his mill over the Arkansas River. It worked by waterpower. Soon Warkentin owned several milling companies. Kansas wheat was made into Kansas flour!

By bringing the idea of hard winter wheat to Kansas farmers, Bernard Warkentin and the Mennonite farmers changed Kansas agriculture. They helped establish Kansas as the wheat state.